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ABSTRACT

This paper details problems that can exist in a school district-university relationship, based on the author's experience as a professor with a leadership training project for urban schools. It is stated that the different orientations that exist between the personnel of the two institutions can create constant tension in such a joint project. Seven propositions are examined by the author: a) field contacts should start at high level and move down to participants; b) leaders best understand the objectives of research; c) observers may see connections between events while participants do not; d) participant observation becomes in part, a process of registering, interpreting, and recording; e) the observer should not maintain situations in which he is in conflict with the observed; f) the observed relies heavily on informant data; and g) rumor plays a significant role in information transmission. It is concluded that while interpersonal and intraorganizational conflict cannot be avoided, an understanding of the factors that produce the conflict, including those discussed in the propositions in this document, may help to manage the conflict and keep it from becoming dysfunctional to organizations and individuals. (JA)

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LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR URBAN SCHOOLS: A PROFESSOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by

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Leadership Training for Urban Schools

A Professor's Perspective

by

Margaret A. Ramsey

A major factor in any joint school district-university endeavor is the differences that exist between the personnel of the two institutions in their major orientations. Universities tend to be cognitively oriented, school districts, action oriented. While this difference would seem easy to bridge in two institutions engaged in teaching-learning, the opposite is true. The value system of universities tend to allot more space for books, for professors to do research and write and counsel with students; school districts have almost no space for books or for teachers to prepare for class, think or write. School districts could care less if any of their personnel publish while universities could not care more, and the personnel in both institutions generally agree more with their institutions than the reverse.

These differences, to mention a few, create constant tension when the two institutions undertake a joint project. The assignment of space, the allocation of time, the use of time provide constant opportunities for conflict,for what seems perfectly correct to one institution (and its personnel) is intolerable to the other. This paper takes the professor's perspective and format. In doing so I chose to point to certain selected literature about societies and organizations and to indicate how my recollection of our joint school district-university project fit or failed to fit these propositions.

Proposition #1:

> Generally field contacts should move from persons in the highest status and authority positions down to actual participants in the field situation one wants to study ...early contacts with leaders of both organizations should present either side identifying researcher as partisan. (McCall-Simmons, page 68)

The above was true, at least initially for the Senior Director. For the Junior Colleague and Co-Director, the reverse process was generally true: that of working with students and gaining access to key officials in the school district through these people. Also the Junior Colleague gained access to key university personnel through the Senior Director.

The Senior Director actually established contacts with lower eschelon people in the program through his Junior Colleague, getting to know them only vaguely in most cases and counting on the Junior Co-Director for information about their progress in course work and internships. The uniqueness of this roles entry and the reversal of the hierarchical movement during entry of the Junior Co-Director may account for some of the hostility and anxiety produced in the program among certain university and school district personnel.

Proposition #2:

> Top leaders are often in the best position to have the vision and perspective to understand what (the) research is trying to accomplish. (McCall-Simmons, page 68)

Given that this program was an extension of the Philadelphia system, doctoral research should have been a given and logical extension of the program. Such research was often difficult to accomplish because of "timing" and other subtle political reasons. The closer the researcher got to the school system and its problems the more difficult it became

to get done. Data collection was more difficult in Philadelphia than in other districts, at least one significant research problem was abondoned because it was too political, and never was any of the research used to solve school district problems; in fact, it was for all purposes totally ignored.

Proposition #3:

> Often the observer is aware of connections between events when the members of S [the society] are not, even though they are aware of the events themselves. (McCall-Simmons page 18)

There must be 101 minor examples of the above. A major example was a total attack on the program and its personnel by the Graduate School. When we tried to point out to students what was happening, they seemed unable to understand or else unconcerned, in general. Even though they were a part of the problem, they could not comprehend connections or patterns as they affected them, others, or the program, at least not until much later. Then the understanding tended to be at a personal level. Perhaps this was because people that fear access to power is power itself when not gained in "normal" ways.

Both organizations (the university and the school district), as time went on, began to see each representative as clearly identified with the other organization's interests. For example, the university saw the co-directors as being pro-school district in their interests and the school district saw the co-directors as being pro-university. This was because, for the co-directors, the students were the focus of concern. The students were at the university for certification and/or to obtain degrees, and the school district saw that as the university's territory. The

university saw the students' "garnering" of such ritualistic tokens (degrees) as being supportive of the school district personnel. When exceptions were requested by the co-directors, whether from the university or the school district, that organization tended to view the request as destructive to itself and supportive to the other organization. The co-directors tended to view the request as supportive to students and usually of benefit to solving urban education problems (presumably a concern of both the district and the university). Occasionally, perhaps frequently, officials of both organizations saw such requests as an attempt on the part of the co-directors to gain personal power. Such divergence of assumption about the focus of interest produces basic differences in one's analysis of patterns and their meaning.

Proposition #4:

> ...participant observation becomes, in part, a process of registering, interpreting, and recording. (McCall-Simmon, page 91)

Perhaps this order should be changed to recording, registering and interpreting. Top administers in both organizations became participant-observers in the evaluation and facilitation of such projects. When interpretation or analysis come prior to recording and registering of patterns, or those patterns are based on different values, perceptions, assumptions or the press of institutional or individual power among top administrative personnel, conflict will result. Many things observed only later "registered" (in terms of its importance and pattern). This often alters the significance and interpretation or analysis. This delay in data collection, patterning and analysis is called "filling out" (McCall-Simmons, page 92) and is important to understanding. Failure to suspend judgement results in conflict.

Proposition #5:

> It is important that the investigator does not maintain situations in which he is in conflict with the observed, provokes excessive anxiety in them, or demonstrates disrespectful attitudes toward them.
>
> ...the importance of participating with the observed on a "simply human level" relating not only in specific formal roles, but also in terms of sentiments (is important). (McCall-Simmons, page 94)
>
> .... (One is confronted with a process of) passive participation to active participation.
>
> Thus, on the continuum of affective participation, the variables are the nature of the investigator's emotional involvement in the interaction he is observing as well as the degree to which he becomes involved. (McCall-Simmons, page, 96)

Obviously such a process of passive to active participation requires the "filling in" process described earlier. It is a gradual process. Without suspended judgement, conflict will result. This kind of program almost necessitates the sharing of sentiments and the kinds of interactions that involve close emotions, loyalty, friendship, perserverence and group goal orientation. By the same token, these interactions and ties almost prohibitively bias the observer and actors in such a study and program. Thus, conflict is almost unavoidable. Program directors, students, and top organizational administrators must be able to manage such conflict if dysfunctional conflict is to be avoided.

Proposition #6:

The use of informant data is relied upon heavily in participant observer studies. As programs such as these closely resemble such studies, informant data is essential in them. The following are valid as problems in the use of informants:

a. barriers to spontaneity
b. desires to please
c. other idiosyncratic factors
d. ulterior motives

(McCall-Simmons, page 108)

Again one sees the opportunity for interorganizational conflict and intra-program conflict. A student aspiring to a higher position in the school district may tell one professor one thing and another professor a slightly different version. Still another version may be related to a school district official. School district officials may feel it necessary to provide one version of an event to their superior and another to the university. A professor may value the research opportunity in the program but emphasize the training aspect to the district. As these informant-participants interact, the possibility of conflict increases and rumor runs rampant.

Proposition #7:

Tamatsu Shebutani, in his book Improvised News (1966) discusses the role of rumor in information transmissions. For the sake of brevity, only five elements are noted here:

a. Bias
b. Elements change as time progresses and reports and information is exchanged
c. Access to information makes one an "accessory" to the fact, and places one in a bad light since persons hold dual roles in such a program (e.g. student supervisor, advisor, friend, teacher, organizational administrator). Such a person is expected to share information but being human, is subject to bias and misinterpretation
d. Top figures become topics of conversation and rumor
e. Role conflict in the focal individuals causes them to be viewed differently by members of the separate subsystems and organizations.

Thus, professors who are not central to the program view the work of "program professors" as "unusual" and perhaps not meaningful for they are not (at that time) "regular professors" but are more involved with school district values and concerns. On the other hand, "program professors" are not school district personnel. They are certainly not students in the program. In a sense, in order to avoid conflict, they must be "all things to all people". In trying to play that role, rumor increases. Data one collects

become filtered through the clients or informants perceptions and biases. These biases tend to cause any action to be interpreted in terms of the role individuals think you should be playing and exclude the other roles essential to program operation.

CONCLUSIONS

Any school district university project will create intra and inter-organizational conflict. While this cannot be avoided, an understanding of the factors that produce the conflict may help manage the conflict and keep it from becoming dysfunctional to organizations and individuals.

The notion that the locus of the funding (either in the district or the university) will solve these conflicts or produce more change in either institution. When the funds are gone, little change will remain in either institution. The university will have had a momentary experience with a large group of inner-city minority persons in graduate programs. The school district will have a sizable group of minority group persons, certificated and many holding doctoral degrees, from which they can choose future administrators. It is not likely that much else will be accomplished except it has been demonstrated that the two organizations can operate such a program.

Some individuals are committed to one another personally and professionally. Perhaps in the future they will work together to change urban education, but the effort will be individual as is the committment. Other individuals will use the experience and degree to their own advantage, as they see it.

Our major failure was the inability to generate a thrust to effect urban school problems through training a group of professionals who were committed to working together to solve urban education problems. The notion of programmatic research (through doctoral dissertations) to provide possible answers to school district problems never got off the ground. Teams of

program participants were never assigned to work together to bring about change in urban education. Most university personnel worked only passively in the program and with selected individuals. The experimental admissions criteria will not likely continue or influence change in Graduate School policy.

Our major success is the fact that a significant number of minority persons have obtained certification and degrees (many doctorates). This creates a pressure on the school system that has only begun to be felt. This pressure has already resulted in increased minority appointments in administrative positions. The next decade will produce more of this effect. If for no other reason this effort was worth the conflict.

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ERRATA SHEET (RAMSEY AERA)

1. p. 2., 2nd paragraph, line 5 - role instead of roles

2. p. 3, Proposition #3, 1st paragraph, line 8 - eliminate "that"

3. p. 7, Paragraph 2, line 3 - add "is not borne out by this program" after institution.